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ABSTRACT

A retrospective ethnographic study examined the sociocultural environments of fifth-grade Navajo children who have become successful readers. During the second month of school, six fifth-grade teachers at Fort Defiance Elementary School on the Navajo Reservation identified 66 of their 150 students as successful readers, a judgment that was verified for 63 of the students by individual reading evaluation based on miscue analysis. This success rate is much higher than those commonly reported for Navajo children taking standardized achievement tests. Demographic and sociocultural data revealed that the development of literacy among these children was not prevented by home environment conditions, such as low income, single parenting, alcoholism, and employment, nor by linguistic differences or limited amounts of written material in the home. Open-ended interviews with 11 female and 4 male students and their parents, teachers, and principal identified the home, rather than the school, as the most important factor in the students' development as successful readers. Within the home, the achievement of literacy was assisted by child-initiated activities and questioning and supportive adult responses, rather than by direct instruction. Two case studies detail some of the multiple paths to literacy in this Navajo community. This paper contains 22 references. (Author/SV)

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Beating the Odds: Navajo Children Becoming Literate

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ABSTRACT:

By traditional measures of success, minority students in the U.S. are typically less successful in becoming literate. However, there are large numbers of minority students who are literate. This paper presents results from a study of the sociocultural environments of fifth grade Navajo children who have become successful readers.

This retrospective ethnographic study, conducted in a small community on the Navajo Reservation, begins the process of identifying and describing in detail the characteristics of the home environments leading to this success. The study also investigates social and cultural factors beyond the homes and families, including a brief look at the role of the schools and the community in reading development for these identified students.

Successful readers, as identified by classroom teachers, were given an individual reading evaluation based upon miscue analysis, to verify their reading proficiency. Data on the sociocultural environment was gathered through open-ended interviews with fifteen selected students, their parents, teachers, and school principal, and through searches of the students' school records.

Data from this study suggests much higher success rates for Navajo children than commonly reported with standardized achievement tests. Myths of Navajo and other minority failure are exposed by studying these and other instances of Navajo success. Home environment conditions, such as low income, single parents, alcoholism, and unemployment did not prevent the development of literacy for these children nor did linguistic differences or limited amounts of written material in the homes.

Teachers, parents, the school principal, and students themselves each identified the home, rather than the school, as the most important factor in the students' development as successful readers. Within the home, the achievement of literacy was assisted through child initiated activities and questioning, and supportive adults' responses, rather than through direct instruction. Literacy, for each child in the study, was achieved in different ways. Two case studies provide a detailed view of some of the multiple paths to literacy in this Navajo community.

Multiple Paths to Literacy

> We are the meaning makers--every one of us: children, parents, and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature--parents and teachers--the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich <u>their</u> meaning making. (Wells, 1986, p. 222)

The Navajo children in this study, like children throughout the world, are meaning makers in their own society. Their success in constructing meaning is not restricted to oral language, but also includes written language. In spite of socioeconomic factors, language differences, and limited access to printed materials, Navajo children do become literate. This paper presents evidence of how that literacy development takes place, in a variety of ways, for children who are considered "at risk" for literacy development and school success.

This ethnographic research study investigated the home environments of Navajo fifth graders who had become successful readers. Its data strongly suggests that not only do a higher proportion of Navajo youth become successfully literate than commonly reported, but also provides insight into the multiple paths to literacy that these children take.

Literacy Teaching or Literacy Development?

Reading and writing instruction in most of our schools today continues to be dominated by basal readers and other textbooks. Teachers have become the "scripted technicians" faithfully following the detailed lessons provided with the basals (K. Goodman, P. Shannon, Y. Freeman, S. Murphy, 1988). This view of teaching and learning how to read and write assumes a single path to literacy. The rate at which one travels this path may be varied, but the steps and the direction on that path are invariant. Literacy, in this view, becomes a product manufactured by the assembly line of the schools and textbook exercises. The quality of the "products" is then often used to compare the various manufacturing techniques, judging one technique to be superior to others, as in the case of <u>The Great Debate</u>, Chall (1967).

Opposing this technocratic view of literacy is the belief that oral and written language are developed, even "re-constructed," by individuals in social and cultural contexts. This view is supported by volumes of contemporary research (Holdaway, 1979; Taylor, 1983; Heath, 1983; Bissex, 1980; Wells, 1985; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Y. Goodman, 1990; among others) studying the development of oral language and literacy in the natural environments of the learners. To the extent that each individual is immersed in unique environments, each

individual develops literacy (and oral language) in truly individual ways. To the extent that individuals share experiences, values, and ways of language use with other members of their cultural or social group, those individual ways share many commonalities (Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986; Hudelson, 1986).

On the Navajo reservation, as elsewhere, children grow up trying to make sense of the world around them. It is not surprising that children in literate societies also try to make sense of the literate world, beginning at a very early age. In fact it would be surprising if they did not try to make sense of their literate world, particularly when it has so many important messages.

Cultural, Economic and Social Characteristics

The "successful" Navajo children in this study have much in common with each other, and also much in common with their less successful classmates. They have a common cultural and historical background, they are members of the same minority group, they are approximately the same age, they live in the same geographical area, and all are in the fifth grade and have attended the same public school for at least four years. The teaching methods and materials used in their various classrooms are similar or identical to those used in other classrooms both on and off reservation. The children share with their off-reservation peers and each other, many of the same tastes in popular music, television shows, movies, food, and clothing. The income range of the families in this community is narrow, with more than 80% of the children qualifying for free or reduced school lunches. None of these characteristics distinguishes the identified "successful" readers from their peers who are less successful. Clearly, these similarities can not legitimately explain either the successes or failures of these Navajo fifth graders although many of these socio-economic and cultural characteristics have been frequently used to explain the lower success rates of other minority students.

In spite of all of the above mentioned commonalities, there is also much diversity in the student population that attends Fort Defiance Elementary (FDES). The majority of the students attending this school live in the town setting of Fort Defiance, while the other students live in more rural areas, within twenty miles of the school. The rural students ride buses to school, traveling as much as one and one-half hours each day over dirt roads. (These roads often become impassable during portions of the school year, due to deep ruts and vast areas of incredibly slippery mud.) The economy of the rural families tends to be livestock based, while the town dwellers' tends to be based on wages, although both populations depend heavily upon government assistance payments.

The town dweller does not necessarily experience the benefits of urban living that one might imagine. This "town" of approximately 3,000 residents does not have the commercial development of a community the same size off the reservation. There are only three small convenience stores each with very limited selections, and there is not a single grocery store.

Two locally owned burger shops (one just recently opened) are the total possibilities for "dining out." A video store, a service station, and a laundromat are the only other retail establishments. There are no bookstores and no public library, though one convenience store does carry a variety of comic books and magazines, a daily newspaper, and a few paperback books. Before the opening of the convenience stores less than a dozen years ago, shopping was limited to two trading posts, a single store in the adjacent community, or more complete shopping 32 miles away in Gallup, New Mexico.

The rural isolation and limited access to written materials certainly has an impact upon literacy development. In a study of non-school literacy use and literacy accessibility in the state of New Mexico, McKinley county had the highest poverty and unemployment rates, one of the lowest accessibilities to literacy materials, and the second lowest high school graduation rate in the state (Altwerger, et al., 1986). Although no formal study on literacy accessibility has been conducted for the Navajo area, it is likely that similar or even lower rates would be found for the school district in this study. McKinley county borders this district, and has a 79% Native American/Hispanic population, but has the advantage of having a population center (Gallup, New Mexico) of more than 25,000, with a public library and many commercial establishments stocking reading materials.

The Public Health Service hospital in Fort Defiance, three public schools, and various federal and tribal governmental agencies are the major employers in the area. An electronics manufacturing plant, employing about four hundred workers at near minimum wages is the largest single private employer. The majority of the employees at these institutions live in the town area of Fort Defiance.

Though the average income is very low, and the income range is restricted, there is still a range in family income from a public assistance level to a moderate level for two income families. However, it would be extremely rare for the two income families to earn $40,000 or more per year. The more common range would be $20,000 or less for two income families, and below $12,000 for single income families. Unemployment is estimated to be in excess of 35%. However, these incomes, like property, expenses, and responsibilities, are often shared with extended family members, so that the distinctions between income levels within this community may blur to a fair degree. Free medical care is available to all American Indians at the PHS hospital, regardless of income.

Literacy development can be affected by numerous other individual and family differences, including: the home language, proficiency in English, traditionality, religious preferences, child rearing practices, and the quantity and types of literacy materials in the home. Other factors include: parental education levels, the number of siblings, parental attitudes towards education, and social conditions within the home. The amount of television viewing, the amount of reading done at home, absenteeism, attendance at preschool, and the interaction between the homes and the school can also have impacts upon the

literacy development of children. These variables will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper, as the general findings are presented, and in the case studies following.

Since each of the identified successful Navajo readers comes from a unique literacy environment, it is important to explore those characteristics that are similar and those that are different in order to understand literacy development on the Navajo reservation. This paper presents those findings in general terms, and then explores the literacy development of two of the successful readers in greater detail. As in all ethnographic research, great caution must be used in attempting to apply the results of this research beyond the population studied. The individuals within this study each achieved literacy in different ways, so one should expect that individuals with even more divergent backgrounds would travel different paths towards literacy.

Traditional Measures of Success in Reading

Using traditional measures of success in reading, a disturbing number of Navajo children at this school could be classified as failures. On the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) Reading Test given each spring, the Fort Defiance Elementary fifth grade class scored at the 39th percentile (when ranked by average grade equivalent). Sixty-seven percent of the Navajo fifth graders at FDES score below the national mean, and fifty-seven percent score below the 40th percentile. Depending upon which of these two arbitrary cut-offs for success and failure one uses, only between 33% and 43% could be considered "successful" based upon the norm-referenced test results. This alleged failure rate, as determined by these tests, is even higher for the more rural districts on the Navajo reservation. However, standardized norm-referenced tests are not the most appropriate means for evaluating reading proficiency, particularly for minority students (Hartle-Schutte, 1991). By definition, half of the national student population is expected to score below the mean on norm referenced tests, and minority students are typically overrepresented in the lowest quartiles.

One might instead turn to the basal reading program to determine which students are successful in reading, since the reading program is used daily, while the ITBS reading tests are given on a single day each spring. Teachers are also much more involved with the basal reader program, and frequent tests are given to evaluate student achievement in reading. However, the students at FDES fare even more poorly on this measure of reading achievement. Fewer than one-fifth of the fifth grade students are reading at "grade level," according to the publisher's designation. This figure could be manipulated to claim a failure rate of 80%. But, as was well documented in "Report Card on Basal Readers" (K. Goodman, P. Shannon, Y. Freeman, S. Murphy, 1988), the basal reader format as well as the basal student evaluation schemes are seriously flawed. Neither gives an accurate picture of what a child does and can do while reading meaningful, interesting texts.

Report card reading grades can likewise be rejected, because they are based largely upon the students' progress through the basal reader series. Durkin (1984) discovered that the relatively low reading grades of some of the successful readers in her study were due to poor quality of students' written work associated with the reading program. Workbook pages, duplicated worksheets and multiple-choice tests are the principal means of assessment of reading in the basal reader program. Students at the school in this study who do poorly on these exercises, even if they are good readers, are often given low reading grades and are required to repeat lessons or entire levels in the basal program.

Estimates of Percentages of Successful Readers

The identification of successful readers for this study focused, instead, on teachers' judgments and the actual observation of students as they read orally, retold the story, and answered questions about their reading. The actual assessment of reading proficiency followed the format of Alternative Procedure IV for reading miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson & Burke, 1987).

During the second month of school, the six fifth grade teachers at FDES were asked to identify Navajo students in their classrooms who were able to independently read self-selected and assigned reading material at or above the fifth grade level. Teachers were asked not to use Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores, report card grades, student behavior, or work habits in making their assessments.

Through the initial identification process by teachers, approximately 44% of all of the Navajo fifth grade students at FDES were judged to be successful readers. The percentages for the six individual classrooms ranged from 35% to 52%. Interestingly, the Navajo teachers tended to report lower numbers (35%, 38%, and 39%), while the non-Navajo teachers reported higher numbers (50%, 50%, 52%). Although the class compositions are theoretically equivalent, in practice, the students who may need further explanations in oral Navajo are more frequently placed in the classrooms with Navajo speaking teachers. These students also have a tendency to have more difficulty in reading in their second language. Whether this factor alone can explain the discrepancy between the Navajo and non-Navajo classrooms is not known. There was no difference between the classrooms in the number of students who were initially identified by teachers, and were later dropped from the study when their reading was individually evaluated. (The three students who were dropped were in three different classes).

Beyond this point in the identification process, there are safeguards against inclusion of unsuccessful readers, but there is no mechanism for guarding against the exclusion of successful readers. The percentages of successful readers identified in this study, therefore, may be significantly understated.

For example, three students identified by teachers were dropped from the study because of relatively low comprehending

scores on the RMI procedure IV. However, transfer students, who may be good readers, were not added. Also, eleven students who scored above the 55th percentile on the ITBS at the end of fifth grade were not identified by teachers, and therefore not included in the "successful group." It is likely that most of those students would have been found to be successful readers had they been individually evaluated. They were either missed in the initial identification process; or had improved greatly through the course of fifth grade; or, conceivably but not likely, did well on standardized tests but were not particularly good readers.

As shown on Tables 1 and 2, girls were identified by teachers as successful readers nearly twice as often as boys were. Sixty-five percent of the successful readers identified by teachers are girls, while boys accounted for only 35%. Curiously, of the eleven students scoring above the 55th percentile on the ITBS that had not been identified by teachers, ten are boys. It appears likely that teachers are less likely to identify successful male readers.

Table 1. Initial Identification of Successful Readers, By Gender (Total N = 150)

	Successful	Not Successful	Total
Male	23	53	76
Female	43	31	74
Total	66	84	150

Table 2. Percentages of Total Number of Navajo Readers Identified as Successful and Not Successful

	Successful	Not Successful	Total
Male	15.3%	35.3%	50.6%
Female	28.7%	20.7%	49.4%
Total	44.0%	56.0%	100.0%

Under-Reporting of Successful Readers

If the teachers' initial assessments were corroborated by individual evaluation, then a minimum of 44% of the fifth grade Navajo students at this school could be considered successful in reading. However, since this was essentially a dichotomous rating procedure, it is not possible to tell how many of the non-identified students are "fairly successful," "usually successful," or "marginally successful." Although teachers were not asked to focus on oral reading, it is likely that students making frequent, but appropriate, reading miscues and self-corrections in class might not be viewed as particularly

successful readers when compared to students making few miscues. So, some readers who use good comprehension seeking strategies may not have been included by teachers. This would have the effect of further understating the number of successful readers.

On the other hand, it is possible to estimate how many of the identified students are slightly less than successful by individually evaluating their oral reading. Sixty-six students were identified by teachers as successful readers. Those students with preschool age siblings (N=19) were individually evaluated. None of these individuals was an unsuccessful reader. All readers were able to reconstruct, in their own words, the texts that they had read and were able to appropriately answer questions about the texts.

However, three of the nineteen students were dropped from further study because the number of uncorrected oral miscues they made during their oral reading gave them a comprehending score below the 90% cut off point set for this study. Even though they were dropped from the sample, these readers could not be described as non-readers or even unsuccessful readers. It was apparent through their retellings that these three readers were generally very successful in bringing meaning to the texts. It was also evident, as they made a decreasing number of miscues further on in the reading selections, that these readers made many internal self-corrections.

The six teachers cooperating in this study appear to have done well in the identifying successful readers. Essentially all of the students that they listed were able to bring meaning to written texts. However, there is some evidence from the ITBS results that the teachers were conservative in their identification process, and may have omitted some students who may be equally successful as those that they included. A reasonable minimal estimate for the percentage of successful readers in the fifth grade of FDES is at least 44% (the percentage identified by teachers), and very likely well beyond 50%. Kenneth and Yetta Goodman (1978) likewise found that standardized tests and classroom teachers seriously under-reported the number of capable readers in their miscue analysis study of linguistic minority students.

The final sample consists of eleven girls and only four boys. This probably does not mean that more than three times as many Navajo girls are successful readers than Navajo boys? In the initial identification process, 65% of the successful readers identified by teachers were girls. Yet, 91% of the students scoring above the 55th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) who were not identified by teachers are boys. Is there something about successful boy readers that makes them more difficult for teachers to identify, or do boys generally perform better on standardized tests than equivalent girl readers? If one assumes the former and adds on those students scoring above the 55th percentile, then the success proportion for girls becomes 57% compared to 43% for boys.

Using only standardized test scores to identify successful readers, boys account for 42.2% of the fifth graders scoring above the 40th percentile. The final sample for this study was

Other factors in addition to gender are correlated with student success in reading. The location of the students' homes may at first seem to be a strange variable to consider, however many factors are interrelated here. More traditional families tend to live in the more rural areas, relying heavily on livestock for their livelihood, while town dwellers are generally less traditional and rely upon a wage economy. Workers in a wage economy, particularly in white collar jobs on the Navajo reservation have a generally higher level of formal education. Navajo language is much more predominant in the rural areas than in the towns, where English predominates. In general, the town dwellers are much more acculturated than the rural residents, which leads to greater success in western-based educational systems.

It is not surprising that the identified successful readers are, (with the exception of one somewhat traditional student) town residents. This correlates with data compiled by Robert Rhodes of Northern Arizona University (Rhodes, 1988). The reservation school districts that are essentially all rural have a much lower percentile rank on the ITBS than the reservation districts that have a major town. ("major town" again is a relative term--all of the major towns have populations less than 10,000). His other study deals with the success rate of Native Americans taking the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST). Passing this test is a prerequisite for acceptance in teacher education programs in Arizona. According to Rhode's figures, Native Americans who live in towns or cities off the reservation pass this exam at rates two to three times higher than Native Americans living on the reservation. These significant differences do not show up for other racial groups. Rhodes hypothesizes that the lifestyles and experiences associated with more urban living account for the differences.

However, just living in the town of Fort Defiance certainly does not guarantee uniformly high ITBS reading scores, even for the identified successful readers. These successful students' percentile ranks ranged from a low of 22 to a high of 91. The range for the entire school was from 1 to 91, and the highest percentile rank for a student who was not identified as a successful reader was 74. Most of the identified students did score above the national mean, but it should be apparent that the ITBS reading scores are not an infallible means for selecting successful readers in this school.

Criterion Referenced Testing

Students are also given locally developed Criterion Referenced Tests (CRT) each fall and spring. These tests are theoretically used to determine mastery of a number of individual skills in grammar, math and reading. Mastery is considered to be 75% correct for each skill, and a total mastery percentage is calculated for all skills mastered. Since this is designed to be a minimal competency level test, one would expect that these most successful readers should score at least 90% and preferably 100% mastery. However, the range is again wide, from 52% to 91% for these successful readers, with most of the scores

in the 60% and 70% range. The "reading" test focuses on items such as prefixes, alphabetical order, syllabication, word and sentence meaning, "main ideas," and a few short reading sections with accompanying recall questions. Readers' strategies are not evaluated. This skewed view of reading assessment may explain why none of the "successful" readers in this study were able to achieve 100% mastery on the CRT.

Basal Reader Grade Level Placement

Grade level placement in the basal reading series at the end of fifth grade also ranged from a middle 4th grade level to a high 6th grade level. One of the most voracious independent readers had only completed a high fourth grade basal reader by the end of fifth grade. Unfortunately, in the basal reader program, the major portion of assessment is through end-of-unit tests and workbook pages. Students doing poorly on these may be required to repeat entire levels or units. Students are also generally required to go through the publisher's sequence of levels, and are very infrequently allowed to skip levels by taking additional end-of-level tests. Thus, a student making rapid progress is still often locked into the pace dictated by the basal reader program and the progress of peers.

One possible impact on the students' success in reading is the "ability" grouping for reading that is used from 2nd through 5th grades. For instructional purposes, better readers are grouped together, average readers are grouped together, and poor readers are grouped together. Teachers in Durkin's (1984) study attributed some of the proficient readers' success to being grouped with other motivated and successful readers. In this study, only four of the 15 identified readers were placed in the highest reading groups, 7 of the readers were in high-average groups, and 4 were in average groups. So, not all of the students in this study have received the possible benefits of placement in high reading groups.

Other School Records Data

Preschool attendance is another factor that may have an impact upon success in reading, but attendance was far from universal among the successful readers. Enrollment forms indicate that only 7 of the 15 students had attended preschool. For this group, success in reading does not appear to be dependent upon earlier preschool experiences.

School records also contain student attendance records and report card grades. Again, there was great variability within the successful reader group. Individuals' attendance ranged from two students' nearly perfect attendance for 6 years to one individual who missed 208 days of school in four years, and another who missed an average of 23 days each year for six years. There are also many students who were not identified as successful who have excellent attendance. In fact, for the entire school, daily attendance averages above 96%, and the attendance for the "unsuccessful" readers was equal to that of identified students. So, it appears that attendance alone is not good predictor of an individual's success in reading.

Table 5
School Data of Successful Readers

Student	ITBS %ile	CRT % Mastery	GE Basal Reader *	Report Card Grades	Attend-ance +
01	64	NA	5.5	2's	P
02	84	91	5.8	2's & 3's	G
03	28	78	5.0	3's	G
04	56	70	4.6	2's & 1's	VP
05	68	74	6.4	3's	E
06	72	61	5.8	3's	G
07	72	87	6.4	3's	F
08	68	83	6.4	3's & 4's	G
09	39	52	4.9	3's	G
10	58	87	5.8	3's & 4's	P
11	66	91	5.8	2's & 3's	F
12	28	65	5.5	2's & 3's	G
13	78	NA	6.4	3's & 4's	F
14	91	87	7.2	4's	G
15	41	78	5.5	2's & 3's	G
16	53	87	5.5	3's & 4's	E

#14 dropped from study due to family emergency
* At end of fifth grade school year

Report card grades are numerical grades with the following descriptors: 4 = excellent, 3 = good, 2 = average, 1 = below average. When two numbers are listed, the first number is the predominantly appearing grade and the second is a frequently appearing grade.

+ Attendance determined by average days missed per year.
E = excellent = < 5 days/year
G = good = 5-10 days/year
F = fair = 11-15 days/year
P = poor = 16-20 days/year
VP = very poor = > 20 days/year

Report card grades, too, range from below average for some students to excellent for others in both reading and other subjects, though the majority of the identified students' grades are generally good. As Durkin (1984) found in her study, grades in reading are often dependent upon written work, and not on actual proficiency in reading. Reading grades at FDES are primarily determined by test results on the end of level tests and by grades on daily workbook pages. As mentioned previously, this work may not only affect student grades, but also the rate of progress through the basal reader series. All of the preceding data are summarized on Table 5 above. ITBS scores are national percentile rankings, Criterion Referenced Test (CRT) scores are expressed as percentage of skills mastered, and the

basal reader data is expressed in terms of the publisher's designation of grade level.

In addition to the data summarized on the previous table, I was also able to determine whether the students' success might be due to a particular teacher or combination of teachers. There are six or seven different classrooms at each grade level at FDES, and the successful students were distributed throughout all of the classes at each of the grade levels, and there was never a concentration of these students in any one teacher's class. This is not surprising, since the students are "reshuffled" each year. The school also attempts to have the composition of each class in each grade level to be essentially equivalent. There is no evidence of a "super teacher" or a set of teachers common to the successful readers in this study.

Relying exclusively on these data of the students' school records only reveals two consistent patterns for the successful readers: they generally live in town, rather than the rural areas; and girls are identified more often as successful readers than are boys. Other factors such as home language, attendance, achievement test scores, basal reading series level, previous teachers, report card grades, and family characteristics all show great variability among the successful readers. These are not reliable indicators of success (or potential failure) in reading, nor do they even begin to explain the process of the development of the successful readers.

Since oral and written language development are both sociocultural achievements (Wells, 1986), it is important to look beyond the school records, and to look at the human interactions that have affected this development. Data was gathered through interviews with each student, their parents (or guardians), their current and previous teachers, and the school principal.

Through each of these sources, a number of issues were explored, but particularly focusing upon what each interviewee judged as important in the identified students' development of literacy. The interviews were open-ended, beginning with more general questions (What do you remember about _____ learning to read?) and progressing to more specific questions if the information did not emerge in earlier answers (Did you read aloud to _____? How often?) Information on the family demographics and the parents' own educational experiences was also gathered, as well as information about the current literacy experiences within the home, particularly with respect to preschool age siblings. Tables 6 and 7 summarize a portion of this information.

The most striking finding was that schools were rarely identified as an important factor in these students becoming successful readers, while the home was consistently singled out as the most important factor. Each of the sources, including the teachers, identified the families and the students themselves as the most important ingredients in the children becoming successfully literate. Even when asked specifically how the schools might have been important in helping the students become successful, the teachers still gave primary

credit to the families.

The majority of the students were not reading prior to attending school, yet the school still gets little credit for their development. Eleven of the 16 successful students reported that they learned to read at home, but only five of those eleven said they were reading prior to kindergarten. One child learned at preschool and at home, and the remaining 4 children reported to have learned to read at school. Of the students learning to read at school, each declared that it was "hard to learn to read," while 5 of those learning to read at home claimed it was "easy" or "really easy."

Table 6. Successful Readers' Family Demographics

Student	Gender	Age*	# of Siblings	# Older Siblings	# Parents in home +
01	F	12	2	1	1
02	F	11	3	0	2
03	M	12	1	0	2
04	M	12	1	0	1
05	F	11	4	2	1
06	F	11	2	0	2
07	M	11	2	1	2
08	M	11	1	1	2
09	F	11	8	6	2
10	F	10	1	0	1
11	F	11	3	0	1
12	F	11	6	3	1
13	F	11	1	0	2
14	F	11	4	0	2
15	F	11	3	2	1
16	F	11	7	2	2

#14 dropped from study due to family emergency
* At end of fifth grade school year
+ Number of biological parents in home during most of childhood of successful student

Interestingly, only thirteen of the students said that they liked to read, and only nine thought that they were in fact good readers.

According to the students, in each household, everyone above school age can read though not all family members read frequently. The mother was identified as reading least frequently, and the majority of the reading by all family members was either school related or recreational. Surprisingly, students failed to mention the "daily living routines" reading (Teale, 1986) dealing with shopping, cooking, paying bills and other literacy events necessary in our society. The students' view of reading may be one of "reading for reading's sake" rather than reading done in the course of accomplishing a task.

All of the students recalled being read to, though the frequency and duration was widely varied between families, ranging from as early as pre-natally several times daily, to extremely rarely beginning as late as second grade. Most parents read aloud to their children for two years or less. Even though the reading aloud was not extensive, the parents believed that this was the single most important thing in their children learning to read. While there were no major complaints about the schools, and several positive general comments, only three parents made any specific comments about the school's role in their child's literacy development. Two of the three commendations were for the Reading is Fundamental free book distribution program.

Table 7. Successful Readers' Home Literacy Factors

Student	Parent Lang.*	Child Lang.*	School Years Parent	Child Read To?	Ave. Freq.	Age to Age	
01	N/bi	bi	12	Y	4x/wk.	5y-7y	
02	bi	bi/E	13,14	N	--	--	
03	bi/E	E	12,13	N	--	--	
04	N/bi	N/bi	12	N	seldom	--	
05	bi	bi/E	12	Y	3x/wk.	6y-7y	
06	bi/E	E	12,12	Y	3x/wk.	5y-6y	
07	E	E	14,14	Y	daily	2y-6y	
08	N/bi	bi	12,12	Y	1-2x/day	1y-7y	
09	N/bi	E	12,13	Y	2-3x/day	0y-7y	
10	E	E	12	Y	daily	4y-6y	
11	N/bi	bi	12	Y	daily	1y-6y	
12	N/bi	bi	7	Y	2x/wk.	8y-9y	
13	bi	E	12,12	Y	daily	5y-7y	
14	bi	bi/E	11,12	Y	infreq.	3y-5y	
15	bi	bi/E	12	Y	infreq.	2y-7y	
16	bi/E	E	12,12	Y	4-5x/wk.	6y-7y	#14 dropped from study due to family emergency

* N = Navajo, E = English, bi = bilingual. When two classifications appear, the 1st indicates language(s) first learned. The second indicates predominant language(s) currently used.
\+ For two-parent families, mother listed first.

The preceding is a very brief overview of some of the data gathered in the study of successful Navajo readers. Three major points emerge from the data analysis:

1. The literacy success rate is higher, and probably **much** higher than is normally reported. By using more appropriate means of evaluating reading, larger numbers of successful readers are identified.

2. There are a multitude of paths to literacy, each path reflecting the sociocultural environment and literacy needs of

the participants. Literacy is a very personal achievement that is accomplished through interaction with literate others in the sociocultural environment as literacy is used to accomplish particular tasks.

3. The importance of the home environment in literacy development was stressed by teachers, the school principal, the parents, and the students themselves. Direct instruction, particularly at school, was given scant credit for these children becoming successful readers. Rather, learning to read is portrayed as a relatively easy and natural accomplishment for these readers.

The final section of this paper looks briefly at two case studies ("Marty," student #07 and "Henry," student # 04) to contrast two very different literacy development paths and to illustrate how even students who are most "at risk" can achieve literacy.

Marty and Henry: Contrasts in Literacy Development

> The challenge is to explore more completely how economic, cultural, social structural, ethnic, and other factors blend to create the orientation to literacy which exists in a home. (Teale, 1986, p.200)

The information presented in each case study comes from all of the sources in this study: parents, teachers, principal, school records, observations, and the students themselves. None of these sources contradicted the other sources in any major way, and each provided some information that was not available from the other sources. In order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved, the names used here are fictitious, and some personal events or details not related to issues of becoming literate have been modified to disguise the identities of a few individuals.

The two case studies presented here are representative of the range and variation present in the larger sample of fifteen successful readers (see Tables 5, 6 and 7). Any of the fifteen students could have been selected for these case studies, but the two presented here show a wide range in family demographics, as well as literacy environments. Henry (student 04) was selected because, by traditional indicators, he was the least likely to succeed. He comes from a home with severe social problems, extreme poverty, and virtually no books to read. He came to school speaking very little English.

Marty (student 07) is nearly the polar opposite of Henry. His family is the most acculturated and affluent of the group (but earning less than $32,000 per year). His parents have the highest level of formal education, and English is spoken exclusively in his home.

What emerges from these case studies is that language and

literacy are not only developed within social and cultural contexts, but that those contexts can be extremely different, even for members of the same culture.

Marty

Doug and Vicky Wauneka's home is certainly not the average Navajo home. Walking into the living room, one is immediately impressed by the entire wall of home entertainment electronic equipment. The enormous tv is connected to a satellite dish in the front yard, even though twelve channels of cable television are available in Fort Defiance. The video game, VCR, compact disc player, cassette player, turntable, amplifier, and stereo speakers crowd each other on the wall to ceiling shelves. Doug is a self-confessed tv addict and electronics buff. On further inspection, one also notices dozens and dozens of books sandwiched between the equipment.

The Waunekas are purchasing their comfortable three bedroom tract home, which is very unusual on the reservation. Housing is very limited, and is usually subsidized rental housing, mobile homes, or small self-constructed frame homes. In addition to the electronics equipment, their home is comfortably furnished. They have two vehicles, a late model compact car, and a relatively new pickup truck. Both are employed in white collar positions in a tribal enterprise. Vicky loves her job, but Doug "can't stand" his accounting job, and would prefer to set up an electronics shop, but does not have the money to buy the necessary equipment.

They have three children, all boys. Marty, the fifth grader is the middle child. His older brother is in the eighth grade, and his younger brother is four, and does not attend school yet.

During the interview, Doug and Vicky were very open and talkative. In fact, the interview proceeded much like an animated conversation, with no need to continuously ask questions. They are very articulate, with no trace of Navajo influence on their English. Vicky's family left the reservation when she was three years old, to move to southern California. Her father had decided that to open up opportunities for himself and his family he must leave the reservation. He put himself through night school, and eventually became a draftsman. Her mother was a high school graduate, and worked as a nursing assistant. She is described by both Vicky and Doug as a very articulate in both English and Navajo and "a very smart lady," who is mostly self-educated. She is constantly doing crossword puzzles and playing Scrabble. Doug strongly recommends against playing Scrabble with her, because of her skill.

Vicky attended public schools in California and graduated in the top 40 in a class of 500, which she remembers as being very crowded and competitive. Although her parents never read to her, she feels that her peers and the varied interests that they had were crucial in her getting interested in reading and becoming an avid reader. After graduating, she took classes at three different colleges and met Doug in college in Arizona.

Doug grew up on the reservation and attended a mission

boarding school from kindergarten through eleventh grade, and graduated from the local public high school. He had excelled in mathematics during school, was in advanced classes, and was always one of the top students even though he was usually the only Navajo in those math classes. He says he never was excellent in reading, but did spend all his spare time in the library at school reading western novels "instead of chasing girls." He also recalls always having encyclopedias and other reference books around, and having tv viewing very restricted. After graduating from high school, he attended college for three years, but left for a job with a local newspaper because "at that time, money meant a lot more to me than school."

Both parents continue to be avid readers, reading informational material related to their work or hobby interests and also various novels and biographies. They frequently visit book stores when they go to the nearest city and usually purchase several books each time. Doug recalls that they used to have a large collection of paperbacks, but got rid of most of them during several different moves because "they took up so much space and they really smelled bad, we had had them so long." He also recalled taking boxes and boxes of magazines to the dump when they moved. Marty says that he remembers both of his parents and his older brother reading a lot when he was growing up. Interestingly, he spoke in the past tense, as if at the age of eleven he is now grown up.

The reading material has not been limited to adult interests. Over the years, they have always had lots of children's books starting from very easy ones to more difficult, and different children's magazine subscriptions related to their kids' interests. Some of the magazines mentioned included: Boys' Life, Natural History, G.I. Joe, Turtle, and Astronomy. Neither parent recalls being read to as a child, but they just thought it would be a good idea to read to their own children, thinking it would help them later on and that it would be a good sharing time. Vicky often trades both children's and adult books with her sister to get a wider selection. They do not visit the public library in Window Rock, 7 miles away, because it is open only on weekdays during their working hours.

Vicky read frequently to both of the older boys from an early age, but because of increasing responsibilities and longer hours at work, she has not been reading to their youngest son, which she regrets. She fondly recalls the time she spent reading with Marty and how much he enjoyed the experience. Because of his excellent memory, Marty was often joining in while his mother read, even after only hearing a story once or twice. At age three, his parents tape recorded him "reading" The Bear Detectives. This retelling closely resembled the actual text and included different voices for different characters and a variety of sound effects. Vicky said that whenever she read to them, she tried to make sure she picked a good story and always tried to make it enjoyable by reading it dramatically. Marty's good memory also extended to movies that he had seen, and they were often able to hear reruns of the dialogs when they took long car trips.

Reading to the children in the beginning was parent-initiated, but as they became more interested and "figured out what it was all about," they began to get more and more books and it became more of a child-initiated activity. Although he was never "really reading" prior to attending school (according to his parents), he was "always looking at books." Marty, on the other hand, believes that he was reading before he began kindergarten, that his parents' reading to him "a lot," helped him become a good reader. He remembers the picture dictionary that his parents got for him as also very helpful in learning how to read. Neither Marty nor his parents make any mention of the school in helping him to learn to read.

All of the kids have grown up watching a lot of tv and playing video games. But, television, in the words of the addicted father, is not all bad:

> "There is some nice stuff on tv. There's a real variety, especially with the satellite receiver. You know, artists and educational programs on nature and things like that. Of course, there's a lot of junk, too. But it's not totally useless. Sometimes the older boys will get an interest from a program they watch and follow it up at the library or something."

This is similar to the pattern to Vicky, who got into the habit of reading a book either before or after seeing the movie. Once Marty gets an interest, he really stays with it for a long time. His current interest is with wars and military, which began after seeing Platoon. He liked it so much that he got the book to read. He also mentioned that he had read Guns Up, an autobiographical novel by John M. Clark about Viet Nam, and, he reads parts of the newspaper daily--the letters to the editor, the front page, and the comics. Marty decided on his own to teach himself German or Spanish, so he bought language books at the book store.

With all of this fairly adult reading that Marty does, it is amazing that his parents "just assumed that he's just OK in reading."

> "I didn't think his reading was anything real exceptional. We don't force him to read, he just reads a lot on his own."

Marty's interests have also lead him to do large amounts of creative writing. His mother claims that his handwriting is terrible, but that he often types his stories on his grandmother's typewriter. Doug would like to get a computer with a word processor for Marty to use for his writing.

While Vicky is concerned about not reading with their youngest son much to this point, and that he has grown up with videos rather than books. Doug hopes that the children's classic stories that he frequently watches on videos will carry over into reading, and suspends judgment whether it is good or bad. Vicky is quick to answer:

"It's bad, that's where we're failing, because he won't associate the written words with the story. We are changing our priorities. I am really cutting down my time at work, and we are having less tv time. I will really try to read to him a lot this summer, before he starts kindergarten."

Marty, however, has no doubts that his younger brother will also become a good reader:

"He can already read just a little. Me and my big brother teach him. We read a sentence and then let him try to read what we just read. He does pretty good."

Marty's performance at school has gotten mixed reviews. His fourth grade teacher wrote: "A top student--quick learner, full of questions...works at the highest level." On the other hand, one of his current teachers said: "There have been some problems in terms of homework. His parents stress the importance of school, but no real pressure is put on him--as long as there's no F's, it's OK." From his report card grades, though, he has done well, earning A's and B's; he is in a 6th grade level basal reader (although earning a B-minus); and his achievement test percentile ranks are in the 70's.

Vicky and Doug have good things to say about the school, even though they did not give it specific credit for helping Marty learn to read. They are particularly pleased by the gifted and talented program, which they think has been really beneficial for him. Marty is not classified gifted, but he did score above the 85th percentile on the School and College Ability Testing (SCAT) measurement, and qualified to attend special classes for gifted and talented.

One is left with the impression that, although Doug and Vicky are certainly proud of their son's achievements and ability, learning to read and enjoying reading are just assumed in their family. It is just a natural development, and nothing particularly amazing. After all, doesn't every fifth grader read novels about Viet Nam?

Henry

Henry is an enigma. Henry defied the odds. On all typical predictors for success in school, Henry struck out: poverty, a single parent family, an alcoholic mother, a language other than English, male, a minority member, absences totalling more than 200 days in five years, few books in the home. Yet, Henry has become literate--against all odds.

The story of Henry was difficult to piece together, and much is probably missing still, because his mother, the one person who could have provided much insight into his early experiences with written language, died over a year ago. This case study is based on interviews with Henry, his grandmother, two aunts, several teachers, and the principal.

My first contact with Henry was when I was evaluating his

reading to decide whether or not to include him in the study. He chose to read Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes because "it looks more interesting." I do not know what it was about the cover that attracted him. Perhaps the illustration of the Japanese girl looked Navajo to him. Perhaps the artist in him chose the book with the highest quality art work.

As he began to read, I noticed immediately that he had dialect influences on pronunciation and inflectional endings. Many of the Japanese terms and proper names gave him problems. But, his intonation indicated that he was understanding as he read. He did not hesitate when he came to the words "leukemia," "radiation," or "atom bomb." When he had finished reading, he gave a good, detailed retelling without hesitation.

When I asked him if he thought he was a good reader, he replied, "No, because sometimes I make mistakes." His view of mistakes covers both meaning and pronunciation:

> "When I don't know the word or I don't know what it really means. Or if I ask someone for help and when they say it in a different way, then I know I made a mistake."

Although Henry now chooses to speak only English at school, when he entered kindergarten he spoke little English, and mostly Navajo. He has so consistently used English at school that one of his Navajo teachers in fifth grade did not even know that he could speak Navajo. Though his English is certainly adequate on most occasions, Henry's English ability caused him some difficulty at the beginning of the interview. When I asked him to tell me what he remembered about learning to read, he began describing the lessons that were being taught in fifth grade:

> "I learned about commas, when to stop at periods. That was in January, but now we're studying about... um...like recessive [reference? resource?] books."

When we focused on his early experiences, he said that he learned to read in first grade, but that it was sometimes hard and scary:

> "I thought it was going to be hard, and I was scared that people might laugh at you. It was harder because my mom used to talk to me in Navajo, so I didn't know the words in English."

But, he also claimed that he could read "some stuff on tv" before he started school. Nobody had taught him, he just saw the words, and heard them, and made the connection.

> "When I get home and watch tv, sometimes the commercials have words and I read them. That helped me. Now, sometimes I read the credits at the end of movies."

It was surprising to me that he even knew what movie credits were, much less read them. Perhaps he just looked for names that he recognized; or, since the amount of print at home is very limited, he chooses to use whatever is available. Henry also recalled that his mother read to him "a little bit" when he was about four years old. They had gotten a set of children's Bible stories and a few Walt Disney books like "Cinderella and that stuff." His mother also "used to write words down, or a story, then she read it to me and then she says, 'What does this say?'" His grandmother, however, says that there was almost nothing to read in his home, and doesn't remember his mother reading to him at all.

The grandmother was, and is, a very important figure in Henry's life. She was the one to rescue him and his younger brother on the frequent occasions when his mother was on alcoholic binges and had left them alone for days at a time. She frequently talked with him and stressed the importance of going to school, of doing his best and learning all he could, but she did not read to him or look at books with him. An uncle also frequently spoke with him about how he should live his life according to the traditional ways. During his early years, he was frequently shifted between his mother's home, his grandmother's home and two different aunt's homes.

This instability at home had great consequences on his school attendance, on his attitudes towards school, and his success in school. In kindergarten, he missed 26 days; first grade, 49 days; repeated first grade; in second grade, missed 52 days; third grade, 59 days. By the time his mother died in the middle of his fourth grade year, he had missed more than 200 days of school. One would expect his grades to be abysmal, but they were only in the low average range.

During a particularly bad time in fourth grade, Henry and a female cousin of the same age went to a nearby BIA boarding school to enroll themselves. Henry thought that he "did not know much and that school would be too hard" for him, so he told the school clerk that he was in third grade. After spending a short time at that school, he returned to fourth grade at FDES. Before New Year's, he was orphaned and living with an aunt. This was a critical turning point for Henry, according to relatives and school personnel. Before that time, he was not doing well in school, and he was not getting much help at home. Once he moved in with his aunt, she stressed the importance of school, made sure that he attended and did his homework, and gave him responsibilities at home.

This home gave him much more stability, and more positive role models. He says that everyone in the home reads: his uncle, his aunt, his cousins, and himself. Sometimes they "turn on the light, shut off the tv, and everybody reads." There was also much more reading material in this home. They had a few children's books that his cousin brought home from school, some magazines, the newspaper on occasion, and sometimes books from the school library. The home has very few material comforts, however. His aunt is unemployed, and the little money they have is from sales of his uncle's carvings and government assistance.

The principal was able to describe how the school also helped during this period of time:

> "After his mom's death, the school brought the guardians in many times for conferences. We tried to protect him as much as we could. We had an open door policy to the principal's office and he took advantage of it many, many times to voluntarily come in and share his feelings."

Henry also got much recognition from the school for his artistic ability. He has won several contests, the principal displays one of his large pencil drawings in her office, and countless classmates give him compliments and praise for his drawings.

One of his teachers believes that school, for him has provided for much of what has been missing at home:

> "His success has to do with school. He wants to be here, knowing he doesn't have a good home life. School was important to him when he started getting awards and recognition for different things. He performs well for praise and compliments."

Towards the end of fifth grade, his aunt's family was having extreme financial difficulty, and he moved in with another aunt and her family. In this new home, he has shown great self-reliance and responsibility. He does household chores without being asked, and often will cook for himself and other members of his family. His aunt reports that he reads directions on packages, and prepares meals without assistance.

Henry also plays school with his younger female cousin and his little brother. He thinks that his brother will become a good reader because they have been teaching him and reading to him sometimes. At three years old, he is already reading "easy words like 'is' and 'and' and stuff like that." He is also repeating things that he hears on tv, and recognizes words on the screen, just like his older brother did.

Amazingly, in spite of all of his problems, Henry has been scoring at national norms on standardized reading tests since second grade. Yet, probably partly because of his excessive absences, he has completed only a middle fourth grade level basal reader, though there is much evidence that he is capable beyond that level. Fifth grade seemed to be a real turning point for him; the year after this study was completed, he was on the honor roll in middle school.

What has made the difference for Henry? He has had an extremely concerned grandmother who has taught him Navajo traditional values, and frequently saved him from physical and emotional neglect. He has had other extended family members who have helped out on many occasions, and are currently providing him with a warm, supporting home. And, he suffered a great family crisis which brought him to the attention of the school. The school and the principal performed admirably, becoming in

many ways a surrogate family for Henry, providing him with the recognition, the caring, sharing, and concern that was frequently lacking in his home environment.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

> From a socio-psycholinguistic perspective it seems ludicrous to assume that; given a literate society, young children, while actively attempting to make sense of the rest of their world, would selectively decide not to attend to print. (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, p.61)

Ours is a literate society, both on and off the Navajo reservation and the needs and uses for literacy for the Navajo people on the Navajo Nation and in Fort Defiance have greatly increased during the past half century. This increased exposure to literacy has resulted from increasing contact with the outside culture, as well as from literacy changes on the reservation itself.

> ...the observations of the low-income children provide additional evidence for the contention that virtually all children in a literate society like ours have numerous experiences with written language before they ever get to school (Teale, 1986, p.192).

It should come as no surprise, that with these experiences, children from all socioeconomic levels, races, and cultures within our nation become literate. What should be surprising is that so many reportedly do not become literate. Why, when virtually everyone achieves oral language ability, do we have large numbers of children and adults labeled illiterate? Why, at least according to traditional measures of success, are minority students less likely to be considered successful readers?

From this study and others before it (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; K. Goodman & Y. Goodman, 1978; Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986), it is clear that minority children do in fact become literate. Children of single parents become literate. Limited income does not prevent the development of literacy, nor do severe social problems within the home. A first language other than English or a lower status dialect of English does not sentence a child to illiteracy.

Nonetheless, we are still faced with large numbers of children who do not experience success in the school setting. We know that large differences between the participant structures, the interaction patterns, the environment and the values of the home and those of the school can cause difficulties for children when they come to school. It appears that we have two options: either continue the status quo, blaming the students for what we perceive as their deficits and lack of readiness for performing according to the school expectations; or we can actively restructure the school

curriculum so that the literacy knowledge and experiences that each child brings to school is valued and built upon. We need to recognize that there is not a single path to literacy, but multiple paths. No single set of materials, no single scope and sequence is adequate to capture the interests and meet the literacy development needs of all of the children, particularly children of different ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds. If schools can only meet the needs of children who have had the "school valued" experiences, then the schools have failed.

In spite of highly unequal success rates, children continue to be pushed through standardized programs and their progress measured with standardized tests. The tests and programs are seldom questioned, but the students instead are blamed when they fail to achieve according to the promises of the published programs. These standardized programs are particularly detrimental for children of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and those with very different literacy experiences.

We know that children who grow up in literate environments, where reading and writing are used for functional purposes, will grow up literate. We know that those environments can vary tremendously and still provide children with enough information to learn the characteristics of written language, as well as the various functions and uses of literacy. Though oral story reading should definitely be encouraged both in the home and the school, it is only one type of literacy event. Children in our society grow up seeing print used in countless daily transactions, but in schools see a very narrow scope of literacy activities. Therefore, we need to create literacy rich environments in the classrooms reflecting society's range of literacy functions. The children themselves must become the active constructors of their own literate knowledge, rather than passive recipients of packaged reading skills programs. Only by observing and experimenting with a wide variety of functions and uses of literacy can students develop beyond the limited reading and writing experiences defined by most reading and language arts programs. Our literacy experiences in the schools must mirror the authentic literacy functions, needs and uses of the surrounding communities.

We must utilize more realistic literacy assessment techniques that look at what readers do in the process of developing meaning from a written text. This will not only give us more accurate information for focusing our instruction, but will also help our students to realize that the purposes for reading are not merely answering the questions correctly at the end of each passage.

We must allow for choice. As adults, we have much latitude in selecting what we will read, but for developing readers choice is even more crucial. Materials of high personal interest can help students develop a lifelong love of reading. Self-selected materials will also help children experience much more success in learning to read, since it is much easier to bring meaning to texts about familiar topics of interest to the

reader.

And, finally, we must develop true partnerships with parents, where active two-way communication helps both the parents and the schools provide the best possible literacy learning experiences that build upon what the children already know, and prepares them for the literate demands of the outside world. Only then can we hope to achieve "literacy and justice for all."

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